TAKE IT TO THE LORD IN PRAYER

November 1, 1992

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
1 Thessalonians 5:12-18
Luke 18:1-8

"Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances..." -1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 (NRSV)

What you believe about prayer is, I think, influenced by your memory of prayerful occasions, memories of people you witnessed praying.

Author Annie Dillard, who began life as a Presbyterian, dropped out for a long time and has recently joined the Roman Catholic Church, has written a wonderful account of a prayerful occasion which influenced her.

In her memoir, An American Childhood, she remembers how it was to be an adolescent, sitting in the balcony of a Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh with her Junior High classmates during Communion. And in the process, she also manages to capture a lot of what people feel but do not often verbalize about my topic this morning.

> "I passed up the Welch's grape juice, I passed up the cubed bread, and sat back against my coat. Was all this not absurd? I glanced at Linda beside me. Apparently it was not. Her hands lay folded in her lap. Both her father and her uncle were elders.
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> "It was not surprising, really, that I alone in this church knew what the barefoot Christ, if there had been such a person, would think about things - grape juice, tailcoats, sable stoles. After all, I was the intelligentsia around these parts, single-handedly. The intelligentsia. I knew why these people were in Church: to display to each other their clothes. They were sophisticated men and women, such as we children were becoming. In church they made business connections; they saw and were seen. The boys, who,

like me, were starting to come out for freedom and truth, must be having fits, now that the charade of Communion was in full swing.

"I stole a glance at the boys, then looked at them outright, for I had been wrong. The boys, if mine eyes did not deceive me, were praying. Why? The intelligentsia, of course, described itself these days as 'agnostic' - a most useful word. Around me, in seeming earnest, the boys prayed their unthinkable private prayers. To whom? It was wrong to watch, but I watched.

"On the balcony's first row, to my right, big Dan had pressed his ruddy cheeks into his palms. Beside him, Jamie bent over his knees. When had this praying developed?

"Below the balcony, in the crowded nave, men and women were also concentrating, it seemed. Were they perhaps pretending to pray? All heads were bent; no one moved. I began to doubt my own omniscience. If I bowed my head, too, and shut my eyes, would this be apostasy? No, I'd keep watching the people, in case I'd missed some clue that they were actually doing something else - bidding bridge hands. For I knew these people, didn't I?

"No one moved. The organist hushed. All the people seemed scarcely to breathe.

"The people had been praying, praying to God, just as they seemed to be praying. That was the fact. I didn't know what to make of it.

"I left Pittsburgh before I had a grain of sense. I never learned what the strangers around me had known and felt in their lives - those lithe, sarcastic boys in the balcony, those expensive men and women in the pews below - but it was more than I knew, after all."

Prayer has been called the universal human activity. It has been observed that all people in all times have engaged in it, some ritual behavior the purpose of which is to reach out and in some way communicate with God, or if you prefer, with mystery, the transcendent, the holy, what one scholar called the "mysterium tremendium"; and more than connect: praying to influence, to have an effect upon God and the way things are going in life generally; praying for the crops, for rain, for babies, for healing, for victory. [Rudolf Otto, The Idea of the Holy]

When Christopher Columbus encountered indigenous people, he reported that they had no religion. Columbus simply failed to recognize their sacred rites and beliefs and practices. He was wrong, of course. They had elaborate religion and they practiced prayer - as have all people.

At the same time, many - if not most people - have decidedly mixed feelings about prayer... Does it work? How does it work? Is it private, public, or both, personal or corporate, verbal or non-verbal? Is it all right to pray for a job, good health, peace, a parking place? Is it spontaneous and conversational, or disciplined and literary? Should it happen at the dinner table at home, and should it happen in a crowded restaurant, at lunch time. And if not, why not?

Prayer, someone noted recently, is the bottom line for religion. It is where the rubber hits the road, theologically.

Jesus talked about prayer; he provided a simple model prayer for his disciples to follow in their own praying. We call it The Lord's Prayer, but it's actually our Lord's example prayer. They said, "Teach us to pray," and he said, "Pray like this..." What followed was simple, brief, focused on God and God's will, very modest in terms of petitions, asking only for today's food, forgiveness and help in times of temptation. It is an example of abandoning one's own personal agenda in order to conform to God's agenda.

He himself prayed on occasion all night long, and one time he told a story about a judge and a widow, and Luke, who conveys the story to us, introduces it with this caveat. "Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray and not to lose heart."

The judge in the story is a crusty old bird: he does not fear God and does not respect men or women. This is a very difficult man to whom a widow comes asking for justice, perhaps for the adjudication of a dispute, or a judgment about a debt or an inheritance. She is a person with absolutely no influence or power or money, the easiest person to ignore, overlook; the last person whose plight will mean anything to the heartless judge.

Nevertheless, she gets his attention, and she does it by her relentless pleading, her nagging, essentially. He finally gives in - not out of a noble sense of justice for a poor woman. He does it to shut her up - to get her to go away. So, says Jesus, if a cruel judge grants justice to a persistent old woman, will not God be just to those who cry day and night?

This is not a portrait of God. What Jesus is saying here about prayer is that by nature praying demands persistence: that it is not particularly easy and that God pays attention to it.

New Testament scholar, Fred Craddock, tells a dramatic incident that happened in a worship service during a particularly stressful time in the Civil Rights Movement. The minister of a Black church read the parable in Luke 18 and gave a one-sentence sermon.

> "Until you have stood for years, knocking at a locked door, knuckles bleeding, you do not really know what prayer is!" [Interpretation, p. 210] Craddock editorializes, "The life of prayer is asking, seeking, knocking and waiting, trust sometimes faltering, sometimes growing angry. Persons of such a prayer life can only wonder at those who speak of prayer with the smiling facility of someone drawing answers from a hat."

The real problem is just this. To pray at all is to know that prayer doesn't work oftentimes: you don't always get what you want. Sometimes desired results occur. Sometimes not. And furthermore, if the results desired happen because you prayed for them, you are left with more and more serious theological problems than you had to begin with. When a hurricane was headed directly for his television facilities, Pat Robertson asked the faithful to pray to God to change the hurricane's direction. Prayers were offered; the hurricane dramatically veered north and slammed into New York City. So what do you do with that, theologically?

John Boykin is a witty and slightly irreverent theologian who has written a book, The Gospel of Coincidence. In a recent interview in the Wittenburg Door, Boykin says he knows many Christians who seem to believe that God exists to solve all their problems.

> "If you need a job, God will get it for you. Need a date for Friday night? No problem, God will take care of it. Lost your car keys? God will find them. God, the cosmic bellhop waiting to find you a parking space when you need one."

If the utilitarian **does-it-really-work** test is the only way here of thinking about prayer, we will inevitably create some very significant theological problems for ourselves.

But, may I suggest, the utilitarian test may not be the appropriate one. In fact, may I suggest that there is a sense in which prayer always works.

The model prayer, our Lord's Prayer, has been characterized as abandoning oneself, one's will, to God and God's will. "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven," the

strongest phrase in the prayer. I don't know about you, but I have a hard time praying that phrase because you can't pray it without obligating yourself to get up and do something. To pray for God's Kingdom to come is not to pray for the end of the world. It is to pray for a reign of justice and peace and compassion and freedom on earth, in the United States of America, in Chicago, Illinois. To pray "thy Kingdom come" with an ounce of integrity is to be distressed with how little interest we seem to be able to generate, politically and economically, to bringing about that Kingdom. This prayer is a call to action, to work, to advocate, to give. So maybe the first purpose of prayer is to change the one praying. Maybe prayer is not a rearrangement of external realities but a rearrangement in the heart and soul of the one praying, and then the behavior.

John Boykin said it.

> "The purpose of prayer is not to give God a list of assignments. The purpose of prayer is to change us - to align our wills, our attitudes, our perspectives, with God."

This I do know: to pray for someone is to be in a new and different alignment with that person. It is in some way perhaps mystical, to connect with that person. Prayer changes relationships.

Members of this congregation know that the staff and whoever wishes to join them, meet for prayers every morning at 9:00 a.m.; that the sick, hospitalized and people in special need are prayed for by name, and so is a short list of church members every day, until we get through the list and then we start all over again. Sometimes we are asked to pray for people we don't know, but who know us and who will know they have been prayed for. Does it make a difference? You bet it does. Does it always work in terms of affecting a change in circumstance? Not always. Perhaps not often. But to be prayed for, to know that others are praying for you, is somehow to reconnect with the human family; it is to be not quite so alone and isolated: it is to have a little company facing whatever it is you are facing - surgery, unemployment, difficult relationships, pain, loneliness, dying. To be prayed for is to be made more whole.

We are also learning that prayer changes people who pray in remarkably physical ways. Dr. Herbert Benson of Harvard Medical School did some now famous experiments with people who practiced Transcendental Meditation and discovered that it worked: that meditation was effectively lowering stress signals such as pulse, heart rate, blood pressure. Benson noted that TM trainers were charging people two hundred dollars to learn a "mantra," a single syllable which is repeated in meditation. He experimented with simple words like "one," and discovered that the same results

occurred. Benson wrote his observations in a best-selling book, The Relaxation Response and observed that religious people have always practiced a kind of disciplined meditation form of praying. In the Eastern Church it was called "The Prayer of the Heart," or "the Jesus Prayer," a single phrase repeated over and over. "Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me." St. Francis of Assissi used this, "My God and my all, my God and my all, my God and my all." A journal I read and use calls it breath prayer, one phrase as you inhale, another as you exhale. This week it is: "breathe new life" - "into my being." Benson suggests that short phrases repeated, actually force a kind of stable, rhythmic breathing and that itself brings an experience of centering and peace.

Are you interested? Try it quietly. You can do it while you walk, for instance. Use the ancient Jesus prayer, "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me." Or try a variation on that theme: "Christ, have mercy, Lord, have mercy." Runners pray while they run, swimmers pray. If you are seated quietly, learn from Henri Nouwen who says you can never pray with clenched fists, that your hands must be open and empty.

So, if prayer's first focus is us, the ones doing the praying, and if prayer is not solely utilitarian, if it is in some sense conversing with God - getting our will aligned with God - then equal attention must be paid to listening - silent, empty, attention - one of the most difficult assignments for us. We are doers. We are obsessively active. We can, some of us, barely sit still for a worship service. When a worship leader risks asking a congregation to pray silently, we know from experience that one minute of silence is a very long time, that twenty seconds is about right, and that afterward about an equal number of people will tell us that they appreciated it or that it made them crazy.

The people who know people who practice a disciplined prayer life, all say that before prayer is anything it is silence. And that sometimes that is all it has to be, or can be. It is intentionally doing nothing and simply being in God's presence. My favorite definition of prayer is Henri Nouwen's. "To pray," he said, "is to be useless in God's presence." And I was delighted to discover an ancient story of an old peasant who every day at noon went into the village church and knelt in prayer. One day the priest spoke to him. "My son, may I ask whether something is troubling you?" "Oh no, Father, everything is fine," the man replied. The priest still stood there, and the peasant, feeling that more explanation was needed, said, "I just look at God, and God looks at me." [Weavings, Avery Brooke, July/August, 1992]

Praying is God looking at us and us looking at God. Praying is reaching out to that which is beyond touch and sight, reaching

to mystery and holy love. Praying is doing something we only partially understand. Praying is hoping, aspiring, and ultimately trusting that we are not alone, that there is one who is trustworthy.

And so, finally prayer comes out of the depths of our souls, sometimes almost involuntarily, at the limits of life, at those times and places when we know we are not in control, when we know all too well how fragile our lives are.

"My God, why?" Jesus prayed.

And who among us has not prayed that most human of prayers?

"My God, why?"

"Christ, don't take him from me."

"Dear Lord, do I have to do this?"

"Good God, can't there be another way?"

"Thank you, Jesus, for bringing her home."

There is a wonderful Latin formula from the ancient church which says in effect, "How we pray is how we believe. Prayer first... belief later." Our truest theology I sometimes think, is written in those prayers.

We pray as Christians through Jesus Christ our Lord. In Jesus' name... Christian prayer is distinct because it is prayer in the name of Jesus the Christ. Not as a rote formula. It is not as if you must attach the proper postscript in order for it to get through. "In Jesus' name" or "through Jesus Christ our Lord" is a reminder that the God to whom we pray is not an impersonal creator, or an abstraction; our prayers are not addressed "To whom it may concern," but to one revealed by Jesus Christ.

Somewhere deep in the spiritual psyche of many of us is an image of God as a judge, stern, sometimes angry, sometimes punishing, always demanding. And perhaps our ambiguity about prayer is precisely that our basic theology is a theology of fear.

And so we pray in Jesus' name because it was he who told about a God who welcomes the wandering child home, and goes after one lost sheep; a God who leans down to cradle and nurse her babies; a God who wipes away tears and renews strength and helps exhausted men and women to their feet so that they can walk and run and not be weary.

To pray in Jesus' name is to know that you do not have to censor your prayers. You can bring them to God; you can ask for

whatever you want. To pray in Jesus' name is to know that there is a parental God who cares and who can and does say no to our requests in the same way parents say no sometimes not because they are mean, ungenerous or spiteful, but precisely because they love their children so very much.

We pray in Jesus' name because the God he revealed promises always, in all circumstances, to hear our prayers, to be with us.

"Take it to the Lord in prayer," the old Gospel hymn says. And it's true - you can do that - because there is one who is there for you, who loves you, who welcomes your hopes and aspirations, your deepest yearning and fear and anxiety.

"Take it to the Lord in prayer."

The promise is this:

"In His arms He'll take and shield you,
You will find a solace there."

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O God of holy and mysterious love, hear our prayers, spoken and unspoken. Hear the silence of our hearts. Hear our cries of need and our cries of gratitude. Hear us, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.